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Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe

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Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe

Abstract

Kathryn Edwards begins her introduction to this well-conceived volume by noting the “explosion of research on magical practices and the attitudes about them in late medieval and early modern Europe” (1) over the last several decades. Witchcraft has continued to be the fiery epicenter of this explosion, despite scholarship’s increasing recognition that occasional eruptions of witch-hunting were surrounded by a vast and typically much more benign “magical universe” (the phrase is from Stephen Wilson’s 2003 book of the same title, frequently cited throughout this volume). The scholars Edwards has assembled each probe various areas of that universe, in order to understand forms of magic that were more widely and more openly practiced than harmful *maleficium*.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Medieval History

Comments

This book chapter is published as Kathryn A. Edwards, ed., *Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe*, reviewed in *Renaissance Quarterly* 69 (2016): 1462-64. 10.1086/690350. Posted with permission.

Everyday Magic in Early Modern Europe. Kathryn A. Edwards, ed.
Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. ix + 188 pp. \$119.95.

Kathryn Edwards begins her introduction to this well-conceived volume by noting the “explosion of research on magical practices and the attitudes about them in late medieval and early modern Europe” (1) over the last several decades. Witchcraft has continued to be the fiery epicenter of this explosion, despite scholarship’s increasing recognition that

occasional eruptions of witch-hunting were surrounded by a vast and typically much more benign “magical universe” (the phrase is from Stephen Wilson’s 2003 book of the same title, frequently cited throughout this volume). The scholars Edwards has assembled each probe various areas of that universe, in order to understand forms of magic that were more widely and more openly practiced than harmful *maleficium*.

Edwards’s valuable introduction frames the historiographical issues these scholars will confront. There is no absolute agreement on where to draw the lines demarcating “everyday magic.” This modern, academic uncertainty reflects early modern ambiguities. For example, would an early modern peasant have considered an herbal potion taken while reciting a few prayers to be magical, religious, or simply an effective application of a time-honored remedy for an illness? Neither is there clear agreement among modern experts about what to call this range of practices: common religion? Traditional? Popular? Lived? Early modern authorities, when they were not rushing to designate all this as witchcraft, most often called it superstition, but that term is so vast as to be little help either.

Given the breadth of the topic and these problems inherent in any investigation of it, the essays in this volume mostly take the form of case studies. Yet they cover enough ground and engage often enough with similar issues that the volume as a whole becomes an effective survey. Geographically the essays range from Spain to Finland. They touch on witchcraft in places but also cover healing and divination, the interpretation of dreams, magical treasure hunting, and the presence of guardian angels and ghosts in the early modern world. We are introduced to women in Catholic nunneries feigning ecstatic spirituality and a Huguenot minister who chats with a spirit haunting his house.

A key point through many of the essays is ambiguity. Ordinary people, and sometimes even educated elites, did not always conceive of or respond to various manifestations of everyday magic in coherent ways. For example, the Huguenot minister whose house was beset by a spirit, and who, following strict Calvinist theology, should have conceived of that spirit as a malevolent demon, in fact reacted much like his Catholic neighbors, regarding the haunting with some curiosity but not necessarily with pious dread. Of course, religious authorities often tried to impose some level of dread, arguing that many forms of everyday magic were in fact witchcraft. To this, people might respond in one of two ways, either asserting the pious and religious nature of their actions (e.g., a blessing rather than a spell) or claiming that whatever they were doing was in fact an aspect of purely natural craft. Likewise, authorities, when not castigating common magic as dangerously demonic, took the quite different (from the modern perspective) tack of dismissing it as foolish and ineffective superstition.

Another methodological commonality found in most of the essays is the inevitable need to discern everyday practices through the lens of elite sources — above all, learned demonological treatises and court records. Such maneuvers are old hat to those working in the field of premodern magic, so none of the authors belabor the issue. What emerges from a number of the essays, however, is a clear sense of how many subtle changes in everyday magical beliefs and practices were driven, in this period, by the growing obsession of elite authorities to parse, categorize, and more stringently condemn the

broad field of magic/superstition. This obsession was spurred, according to this volume, mainly by reformist impulses, and then of course by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation themselves (although, interestingly, a couple of essays also focus on early modern economic developments and how protocapitalism influenced magical concerns). In a concluding essay, Sarah Ferber valuably reminds readers how much of everyday life in this era was shaped by official religious doctrine and church rituals. Thus a final ambiguity: the complex interplay between elite discourse and quotidian reality.

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